

Pacific leaders' meeting ramps up US-led anti-China offensive

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A meeting of Pacific Island leaders held in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on Monday saw the United States and its imperialist allies ramp up Washington's confrontation with China in the Indo-Pacific.

PNG is deeply impoverished but strategically important and resource rich. It was a key battleground during both world wars and is currently the site of commercial, diplomatic and geo-strategic tussles over Beijing's influence. China is a major infrastructure investor in PNG.

US President Joe Biden was initially due to stop over in PNG en route to Australia for a meeting of the Quad, the de-facto military alliance involving Australia, India, Japan and the US, following the G7 in Japan. After Biden's late withdrawal from both meetings last week, the US was represented in PNG by Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

All 18 Pacific Islands Forum leaders were summoned to Port Moresby, even though Biden's stopover was scheduled for just three hours. The US-led summit was inserted into an India-Pacific forum previously organised by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has adopted a "look East" strategy to expand the country's presence in the Pacific.

Modi's forum, the third since 2014, and the US intervention were called amid their escalating confrontation with China. PNG Prime Minister James Marape effusively introduced Modi as the "leader of the Global South" and India the "third big voice" in global politics. He claimed the Pacific would "rally behind" India.

The major outcome of the meetings was the signing of a bilateral US-PNG Defense Cooperation Agreement giving Washington "uninhibited access" to strategic military and civilian locations, including ports and airports. While issuing assurances that the country's "independence" will not be compromised, Marape declared: "[A]s we go forward over the next 15 years, we will see US soldiers in

our country. We will see US contractors in our country." US military presence is forecast to become the biggest since World War II.

The full text of the agreement is yet to be released, but the US is committing an extra \$US45 million for various programs and \$12.4 million to improve the "capacity" of the PNG Defence Force, including for domestic "security operations." The US Coast Guard will be empowered to operate its "Shiprider" program alongside PNG's maritime authorities in at-sea operations, ostensibly to control illegal fishing.

Marape said the agreement had a clause saying PNG will not be "used as a place for launching offensive military operations." Nevertheless, the strategic naval base on Manus Island, which has had multi-million dollar upgrades by the US and Australia, will no doubt become a major military hub. In Port Moresby last August, Australia's Defence Minister Richard Marles declared Canberra wanted a "greater role" for Manus which he described as a "strategic asset" for countering China.

After Biden's cancellation, Australia's Prime Minister Albanese absented himself, sending Minister for the Pacific Pat Conroy, but Canberra welcomed the US agreement. New Zealand's Prime Minister Chris Hipkins attended and gave Wellington's assent. In a statement reeking of hypocrisy, Hipkins told media: "New Zealand doesn't support militarisation of the Pacific. Having said that a military presence doesn't necessarily signify militarisation."

Students from four PNG universities organised protests demanding the agreement not be signed. Former prime minister and opposition leader Peter O'Neill demagogically accused Marape of having, without consultation, "positioned our country at the epicentre of a military storm between China and the USA." Marape declared Tuesday that the agreement was not a "treaty" and did not need to be ratified by parliament.

Beijing issued a scathing response, saying it was hypocritical of the West to criticise China when both the US and Australia were signing defence pacts with PNG. China's special envoy to the Pacific, Qian Bo, criticised the US and its allies of deliberately undermining Beijing's relations in the region. Qian accused the West of having a "Cold War mentality" and being blinded by "ideological prejudice."

No details of the broader discussions at either summit have been released, but an effort was made to smooth diplomatic relations with Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, who last year signed a security pact with Beijing producing hostile reactions from Washington and its local allies.

After a private meeting with Sogavare, Marape declared his support for strengthening "cooperation on mutual interests and priorities" particularly in "socio-economic development, maintaining law and order, peace and security" in the Solomons. The two leaders signed an agreement on PNG providing policing deployment in the country, which has previously used police trainers from China.

There is ongoing deep concern across the Pacific over the US-led anti-China offensive. Representing the region at the G7, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown, the chair of the Pacific Islands Forum, called on the US and China to not bring "adversarial competition" to the Pacific. "For us, national security priorities are economic security, they are climate security," Brown declared.

Pacific leaders have consistently held that global warming is a greater threat than China. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 18, the Albanese government has been warned it must raise its climate goals or risk Australia's "security" ties to the region. It followed a forecast by the World Meteorological Organisation that global warming will almost certainly exceed a temperature increase of 1.5 degrees within the next five years, posing an existential threat to fragile Pacific islands experiencing relentless sea level rises.

Opposition has also erupted to Canberra's AUKUS agreement with the US and UK, which provides for Australia's establishment of a nuclear-propelled submarine fleet. A group of former leaders, the Pacific Elders' Voice, has flatly condemned AUKUS as "triggering an arms race, by bringing war much closer to home." The new submarines threaten to contravene the Treaty of Rarotonga, signed by Pacific nations including Australia and New Zealand, which in 1985 established a region-wide, nuclear-free zone.

Vanuatu is currently seeing domestic divisions over a security agreement with Australia signed last year. Amid claims Prime Minister Ishmael Kalsakau is moving "too close" to Canberra, some MPs, including within the government, have been pushing to delay, amend, or even scrap the deal. There appears to be little chance Vanuatu will ratify the pact in the near future.

Further resentment is building in the region over failed US promises to deliver funding to countries facing severe financial crises. *Island Business* this month listed a catalogue of commitments that have not eventuated, often stalled in Congress. They ranged from a proposed \$1.7 billion US-led electrification project in PNG, intended to counter China's Belt and Road initiative, to climate mitigation funding and support for the South Pacific Tuna Treaty.

Washington has, since the end of World War II, regarded the Pacific as an "American lake," but largely outsourced oversight to Australia and New Zealand. That period has now come to an end as the Biden administration takes a much firmer, direct hold on the diplomatic, economic and military push against China.

The US has opened an embassy in Vanuatu after its Solomon Islands embassy was reopened following a 30-year absence. Embassies are currently being established in Kiribati and Tonga. Washington is meanwhile shoring up support with its northern Pacific neo-colonial possessions. Blinken has announced a \$US7 billion boost to its so-called "Compact of Free Association" nations, deemed critical to US "national security goals," while renewing strategic pacts with Micronesia, Marshall Islands and Palau.

In the wake of the PNG summit, Biden has formally invited Pacific leaders to Washington for face-to-face talks later this year, following an initial meeting there last September. The US president bluntly told that gathering: "The security of America, quite frankly, and the world depends on your security and the security of the Pacific islands."



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